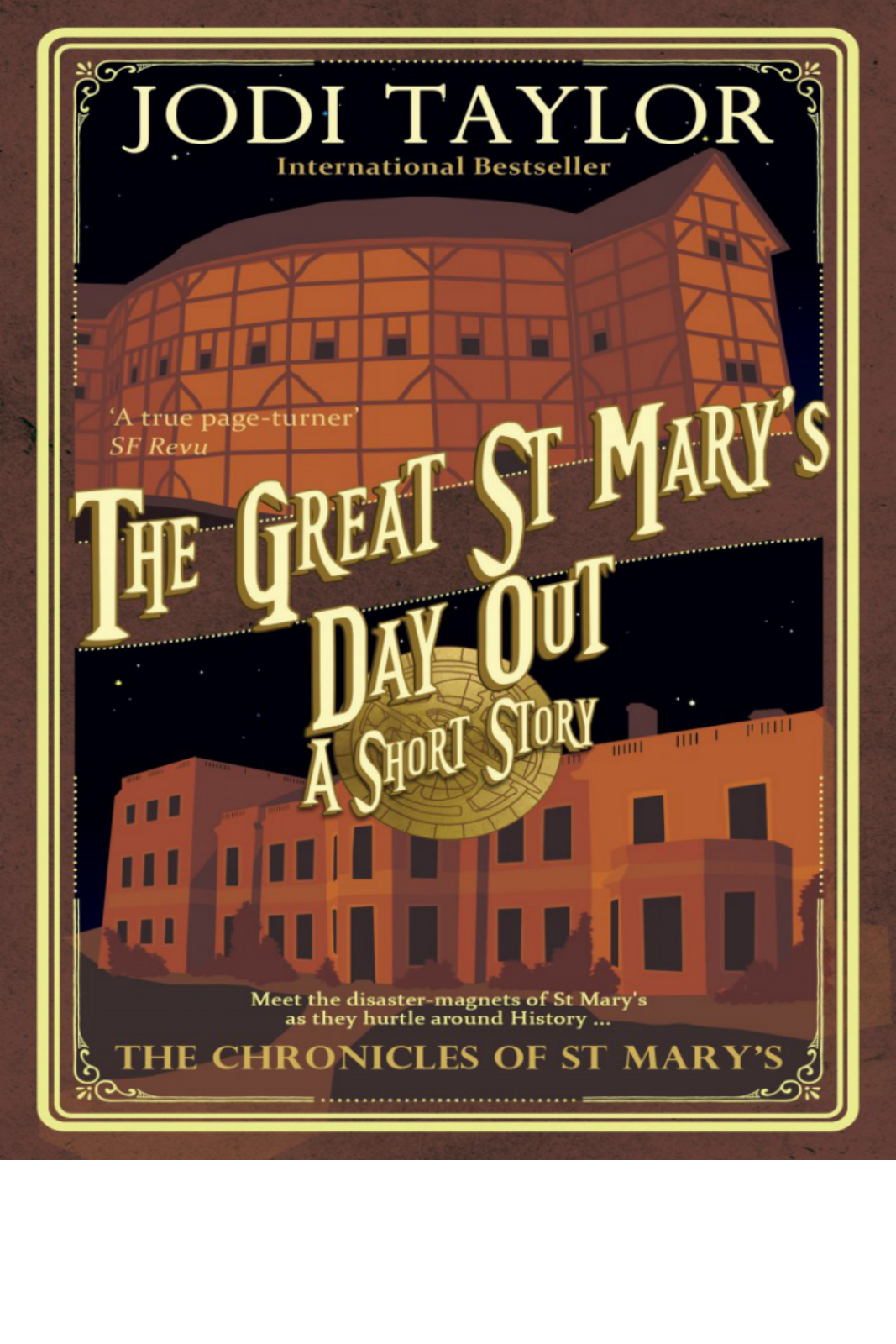




JODI TAYLOR

International Bestseller

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SF Revu

THE GREAT ST MARY'S DAY OUT A SHORT STORY

Meet the disaster-magnets of St Mary's
as they hurtle around History ...

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

JODI TAYLOR

THE GREAT
ST MARYS
DAY OUT

A SHORT STORY

THE CHRONICLES OF ST MARY'S

The Great St. Mary's Day Out

A short story from the Chronicles of St. Mary's
Series

By Jodi Taylor

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Everyone deserves to get away for a bit. Even the miscreants at St Mary's.

Astonishingly, Dr Bairstow has declared a holiday. Even more astonishingly – he's paying for it.

Needless to say, there are strings attached. The trip is to record the 1601 performance of *Hamlet*, with Shakespeare himself in the role of the Ghost.

It doesn't go well, of course. With Dr Bairstow and Mrs Mack turning a simple visit to a street market into a public brawl, Professor Rapson inadvertently stowing away on a vessel bound for the New World, and Shakespeare himself going up in flames, it would seem that Max, of all people, is the only one actually completing the assignment.

Dramatis Thingummy

Matthew Farrell - Small human.

Max - Head of History Department. Wife. Mother. Bemused.

Leon Farrell - Husband and hero.

Dr Tim Peterson - Deputy Director. Would-be husband.

Mr Markham - Unlikely Shakespeare enthusiast. Even more unlikely Ghost. Husband status still unknown.

Miss Lingoss - Multi-coloured member of R&D. A steady hand with a recorder. No husband.

Dr Bairstow - Director of St Mary's. Definitely not a husband.

Major Guthrie - Recipient of an unfortunate blow to the head early on in the story. Possible future husband.

Mrs Mack - Deadly with a skillet and not just in the kitchen. Husband lost in tragic circumstances.

Mrs Enderby - Head of Wardrobe Department. Husband status unknown.

Professor Rapson - Head of R&D. Trainee stowaway. Not a husband.

Dr Dowson - Librarian and Archivist. Not a husband either.

Mr Evans - Security Guard. Unaware of the true meaning of nursery rhymes. Not a husband.

Mr Keller - Security Guard. Not a husband.

Miss North - Historian. Doesn't need a husband. Can probably self-reproduce.

Miss Sykes - Historian. Trainee Apocalypse. No husband yet, but Bashford should watch his back.

Mr Atherton - Historian. Was a husband. Prefers being an historian. Less stress.

Rosie Lee - PA to Max. Doesn't have a husband and doesn't want one

thank you very much.

Dr Helen Foster - About to acquire a husband. To the general astonishment of all.

William Shakespeare - Husband, and playwright.

The cast of *Hamlet*. Rogues, vagabonds, cutpurses, prostitutes, sailors, market policemen, stinkards, an abandoned wife and seventeen children.

The Great St Mary's Day Out – a short story

I walked Matthew around St Mary's because a few things needed to be made clear.

'All right, people. This is a baby. A small human. His name is Matthew and he is not to be floated across the lake in a Moses basket just to see if it could have happened. Nor is he to be stuffed into a warming pan and smuggled into someone's bed. He is not to be dangled off a balcony and presented to the Welsh people as a non-English-speaking Prince of Wales. Permission to include him in any of the imaginative events currently being planned by the History Department is to be sought from his father, Chief Farrell, and good luck to anyone trying that. He is not to be used as a paperweight. Or ballast. Or a draught excluder. Everyone clear?'

You have to tell people these things. Especially at St Mary's.

It was a golden time for me. In every sense of the word. Autumn wasn't giving in to winter without a fight. The trees glowed in the late sunshine – gold, russet, red and orange. In a week, the leaves would begin to fall and Mr Strong, our caretaker, would gather them up for burning, bringing the sharp smell of bonfires on the breeze.

The three of us, Leon, Matthew and I, were back at St Mary's. Without ever having left, actually. Dr Bairstow had requested we remain here while the vexing question of Clive Ronan was resolved. For our own safety. I wasn't bothered and Leon was in full 'Anyone Messing With My Family Will Regret It' mode, and we lived happily in a small suite of rooms up in the attic, so no one could be disturbed by a crying baby.

In fact, he rarely cried – which, as Leon said, just went to show our son was a born historian and already completely failing to live up to popular expectations. He was a happy baby, placidly accepting being passed from person to person, smiling up at whoever happened to have custody of him at the time. He had his favourites, of course. He adored Mrs Enderby, Head of the Wardrobe Department. It was mutual: she was always running him up dinky little clothes to wear. Peterson claimed Matthew was easily the best-dressed person in the place, but since that place also contained Bashford, Markham and Professor Rapson – who frequently had to be sartorially checked over before he ventured out in public – this wasn't the achievement it

seemed.

Matthew's second favourite, astonishingly, was the multi-hued Miss Lingoss from R&D. He would gaze, big-eyed, at whatever hair colour and style she had adopted that particular day, and she, black-leather clad and embellished with chains and safety pins, would beam back at him.

Leon went back to work shortly after Matthew was born, and I wafted around the place for three or four months, playing with Matthew, painting, and generally getting on people's nerves. The usual maternity-leave activities. I was determined to make the most of things before I went back to work.

My return happened a little more quickly than I had expected. But in a good way.

Occasionally, very occasionally, the Boss finds some money tucked away somewhere and gives us a bit of a treat. Rumour has it that he deposited a penny in an obscure foreign bank some ten centuries ago, and is quietly reaping the benefits today. Unlikely, but in our job, we've learned never to rule anything out.

However he found the money, find it he did, and suddenly he was calling an all-staff briefing in the Great Hall, and announcing a forthcoming assignment, which would be open to anyone who cared to avail themselves of the opportunity.

Standing on the half-landing, with shafts of sunlight highlighting the last defiant remains of his hair, he began to bring up a series of images on the screen.

'June, 1601.' He paused, surveying the rows of upturned faces before him.

Silence greeted his remark. If he has a weakness, it's that he's a bit of a showman, and he does tend to dole out information in tiny dollops. We've learned not to play along.

'London,' he said, piling on the narrative tension.

He began to flick through various images, inching painfully along the information highway before finally arriving at his destination.

'Ladies and gentlemen – the Globe Theatre.'

Oh, wow! A chance to see the Globe Theatre. The real Globe Theatre, I mean. Not the very excellent replica we see today, but the actual Globe itself. Shakespeare's Globe. Performing Shakespeare's plays. In a contemporary setting. By contemporary actors. Watched by a contemporary audience. You get the drift.

But which play? 1601? I racked my brains – but not for long.

'We shall, I hope, be attending a performance of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, with...'

Sensing he was building up to his big finish, a stir ran around the Great Hall.

‘...with William Shakespeare himself taking the role of the Ghost.’

An even more stunned silence greeted this remark. He paused, leaning on his stick, well pleased with the sensation he had created. And rightly so. We would be seeing *Hamlet* – the famous production starring Richard Burbage as the dithering Dane ... and with Shakespeare himself as the Ghost. This was just ... I groped for a word more amazing than amazing, failed to find one, and resurfaced to find Markham and Peterson gabbling with excitement. And they weren’t the only ones.

‘Participation is voluntary,’ continued Dr Bairstow, cutting across us, because we’re a bit of a gobby bunch sometimes, and if he waited for the noise to die down then we’d all be there forever. ‘So, if those wishing to participate in this treat could give their names to Dr Maxwell by close of play today, please. Report to Mrs Enderby for costume fittings, collect your background research tapes from Dr Dowson, read up on the play itself, and report to Hawking Hangar at 11:00 two weeks from today. Any questions?’

I really don’t know why he bothers with that last bit. He was already halfway up the stairs and picking up speed. Popular opinion has it that once every couple of years Thirsk University compels him to attend a series of seminars on Modern Management, through which he sits, unspeaking and rigid with disapproval, until their nerve fails them and they return him to us, possibly even less modern than he was before he set out. However, since he can’t bear to waste the money, he forces himself to implement one or two very minor changes every year, such as remembering to command us to sit down – especially if we’ve been wounded – or asking if anyone has any questions. It is always clearly understood that no one ever will. Have any questions, I mean. He did once utter the memorable phrase, ‘Please remember my door is always open,’ and it would be hard to say who had been most traumatised by this remarkable statement.

However, as usual, there were no questions and we were left to discuss what amounted to a works outing amongst ourselves.

‘I’m not going,’ said Bashford, firmly. ‘I suffered enough at school. Long boring afternoons reading endless verse. Even the flies on the ceiling died in self-defence.’

‘Me neither,’ said Clerk. ‘Couldn’t stand it at school; hated it on TV; see no reason why it should be any better in the rain, sitting on seats designed to numb your bum in seconds. Not my idea of a holiday.’

‘Philistines,’ I said, turning to Markham. ‘What about you?’

‘Are you serious?’ he said, his eyes shining and his hair even spikier with excitement. ‘Course I’m going. Who wouldn’t?’

Peterson stared at him. ‘*You* like Shakespeare?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ he said with enthusiasm. ‘*Hamlet*’s not my favourite, of

course. I prefer *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*, but that bit where he stabs Polonius in the arras...

He mimed stabbing Polonius in the arras.

'When did you ever read *Hamlet*?' demanded Peterson.

'At school. Didn't you? And I've seen several versions of the play. Not live, of course. Can't afford it on my wages.' We all looked nervously over our shoulders, but Dr Bairstow really had gone. 'Olivier, Tennant, Branagh, all the greats, and now I'll get to see Burbage. And Shakespeare himself. Although as the Ghost he'll probably be all muffled up so I won't be able to see his face at all, but even so ... I must see if Hunter wants to go as well,' and he disappeared.

'He never fails to astound me,' said Leon, watching him elbow his way through crowds of chattering people.

'Nor me,' I said. I pulled Leon to one side and lowered my voice. 'Did you ever discover his marital status?'

Not so long ago, we – Leon, Markham and me – had been having a perfectly normal conversation about whether Peterson would survive his proposal of marriage to Dr Foster, or whether the worryingly long silence from her office was due to her having murdered and possibly eaten him, when Markham had suddenly let slip that he himself was married. To Nurse Hunter. They'd been married for years. He said. We didn't know whether it was true or whether he was just winding us up and, so far, all our efforts to pin him to the wall and beat the truth out of him had been unsuccessful.

Leon shook his head. 'These are deep waters in which I'm not prepared to swim. He said he was married so he probably is. Even he couldn't get that wrong. Let's just leave it at that, shall we?'

I smiled in what I thought was a winning manner. 'You could ask Hunter.'

He remained unmoved. 'Or *you* could ask Hunter.'

'Or we could get Peterson to ask Hunter.'

He grinned. 'These days, I'd be astonished if Peterson even knows what day of the week it is.'

'I know. Who'd have thought she would say yes?'

'Do you think people are following our good example?'

'I'm surprised they don't regard us as a horrible warning.'

He looked down at me. 'I thought you quite liked being married.'

'Yes,' I said, considering. 'Some days it's not too bad.'

He folded his arms. 'That's it? That's all you've got? "Some days it's not too bad"?'

'I thought you would prefer that to "Some days it's really not good at all." Anyway, can we please stop talking about matrimony? Will you be taking part in this cultural jaunt?'

We don't both go on the same jumps – that was the deal. We'd shaken hands on it. Because if anything horrible ever happened – and it usually does – then our baby son would be an orphan.

He shook his head. 'Not if you want to go.'

'Do you want to toss for it?'

'No. You take this one. I'll have first refusal on the next.'

'Deal.'

We shook on this too.

People were in and out of my office all day. I got no work done at all.

'Nothing new there then,' said my assistant, Rosie Lee.

I regarded her coldly. 'Why are you here?'

'I work here.'

'Really? When did that happen?'

'If you were ever here, you'd be able to answer that question yourself.'

I decided to ignore this. 'Could you get me the King Alfred file, please?'

She regarded me with some hostility. I hastened to make things easier for her.

'A file is a collection of documents. In a blue folder. Blue for the History Department.' I plucked at my blue jumpsuit to make my point.

The hostile stare did not waver.

'And it will have Alfred the Great and the file reference in the top right hand...'

'Just like that one on your desk there?'

'...corner, just like this one on my desk here.'

I picked up the file and opened it.

She stood up. 'Comfort break.'

'Make my tea first. You know the rules.'

She sighed loudly. 'If we had union representation here then I wouldn't have to do this.'

'If we had union representation here then you'd never have been employed in the first place.'

She banged the kettle down. 'I should be paid what I'm worth.'

'You'd better hope you never are. Where's my tea?'

She changed the subject. 'So who's going then?'

I scrambled through my bits of paper. 'A mixed bunch. Dr Bairstow, of course, which is nice because he doesn't get out much. Peterson, Markham, Guthrie, North, Sykes, Atherton, Mrs Enderby – costume research, she says – Mrs Mack, because she wants to check out what people are eating, Evans, Keller, Professor Rapson and Dr Dowson – obviously because the 17th century isn't a time in which they've

blown something up yet and they want to rectify that situation as soon as possible – and Lingoss.’

She stared at me. ‘Aren’t you going? I was hoping to be rid of you for a whole day.’

‘And me. I shall be leaving you a list of tasks to accomplish during my absence, although I don’t know why – it’s not as if you accomplish any tasks during my presence. And I shall be locking up the chocolate biscuits, of course.’

My mug of tea was banged down in front of me with quite unnecessary force.

Since Clerk wasn’t going on this one, I was the designated driver. Or mission controller if you want to give me my correct title. Which no one ever did. I had to endure many enquiries as to whether I could remember what to do.

We assembled outside TB2 – our big transport pod. I’d calculated that we’d need at least four smaller pods to fit all of us in and that many would make us conspicuous. Besides, with so many inexperienced people on the assignment, I preferred us to jump together. I didn’t want anyone being left behind if we had to leave in a hurry, and all the evidence to date suggested that we would.

I ran my eye over the group. We were dressed as lower middle-class citizens. Unimportant but relatively prosperous. Our clothing was dark and respectable, but the material was as good as the Sumptuary Laws allowed. This was an age where clothing defined social status – and vice versa. Peterson had suggested Markham wear a small sack.

I wore a linen chemise, high at the neck, with a dark brown woollen dress over the top, belted at the memory of my waist. My bum roll gave me that authentic wide-hipped Tudor look, although strictly speaking, the bum roll might not have been necessary. I’d covered my hair with a coif and looked every inch the respectable Tudor matron. All the women wore variations on the same theme in shades of brown and russet. The men wore linen shirts and doublets with leather or woollen sleeveless jerkins over the top, trousers to their knees and shoes and stockings. And beards. Well, as much beard as they’d managed to assemble in a little under a fortnight. Which in some cases wasn’t very much at all. There had been general mocking and ridicule.

Bearing in mind the length of the performance, I was carrying a broad-weave wicker basket containing bread, cheese, a small pasty, two apples, a flask of water and a toilet roll. I’d covered all the contents with a heavy cloak in which I had secreted a bar of chocolate the size of Plynlimon.

‘It’s June,’ said Peterson, in amusement, looking at my cloak.

‘June can be very chilly at this time of year.’

We landed in Bankside, at the back of the Bear Garden, which, mercifully, appeared to be closed for the day. The Bear Garden was synonymous with noise, confusion, turmoil and unruly behaviour. Hence the expression – noisy as a Bear Garden. According to Leon, it’s only a matter of time before Bear Garden is deleted and St Mary’s inserted instead. I wondered if perhaps they didn’t open on Globe performance days – too much competition. Whatever the reason, the massive wooden structure – actually very similar in shape to the Globe – was silent today.

We walked quickly past. Southwark is not a respectable area, being full of taverns, bear pits, whorehouses and the like. And the Globe, of course – actors being considered the dregs of society and best kept outside the city walls.

The day was overcast, with heavy clouds, but warm enough. ‘Hope it’s not going to rain,’ said Markham, glancing up at the sky.

I had split us into three groups of five. Not feeling that either Miss Sykes or Dr Bairstow were yet ready to spend several hours in each other’s company, I’d lumped her in with the other two weirdos, Dr Dowson and Professor Rapson, with Keller from Security and sensible, steady Atherton to keep them in order.

The next group – the Respectable Team as I’d named them in my head – consisted of Dr Bairstow, Miss North, Mrs Enderby and Mrs Mack. It was hard to see how any of that lot could topple off the rails, so they had only Major Guthrie to keep them in line.

I’d spent a great deal of time trying to achieve this happy mix of departments – ‘happy’ being a more appropriate word than ‘balanced’. And more accurate, too.

My group consisted of Peterson and me – historians – Evans and Markham – security – and Miss Lingoss, whose purple hair was currently being restrained by copious amounts of hair gel and an industrial-strength wimple.

We had a few hours to kill before the performance started. Dr Bairstow doled out the spending money with all the reluctance of Scrooge handing a penny to a starving orphan in a snowstorm, and the other two teams disappeared. The Weirdos were off to the docks because Professor Rapson was passing through one of his nautical phases and wanted to check out the ships moored below London Bridge. Under Elizabeth, England was a powerful maritime nation. Sir Francis Drake had circumnavigated the world, English ships were trading everywhere, and piracy was the career of choice for many adventurous young men.

The Respectable Team were off to investigate the markets. Mesdames Mack and Enderby were practically frothing at the mouth

in anticipation of investigating Tudor food and haberdashery. It seemed safe to assume that in the company of Major Guthrie and Dr Bairstow, nothing much could go wrong there, either.

Our beat was Borough High Street and London Bridge.

‘Max and I have been here before,’ said Peterson to the others. ‘We’ll show you around if you like.’

We emerged into the crowded, noisy high street and looked around.

Peterson inhaled deeply. ‘Don’t you just love the smell of History in the morning?’

I stood for a moment, lost in the past. Yes, even more in the past than 1601, because Peterson was right – we’d been here before, back in the 14th century, and almost nothing had changed. Some of the houses fronting Borough High Street were larger and more modern, but not many. The road was still more than ankle deep in dust, old vegetables, rotting straw, animal shit, human shit and some evil-smelling, greyish pink tubes that smelled so bad that even a passing dog left them alone. People still yelled at each other at the tops of their voices. Women shouldered their way through the throng with baskets over their arms. A goose-girl struggled to keep her flock together. Occasionally a dust-covered rider on a lathered horse would force his way towards the bridge, possibly carrying a message for the Queen. One nearly knocked us over and Peterson pulled us back against the wall out of the way.

We brushed off the dust of his passing. ‘Hey,’ said Peterson, staring over my shoulder, ‘St Thomas’s Hospital is just down there. Remember?’

‘How could I ever forget?’

‘I got bubonic plague.’

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘And then I peed on you.’

‘Yes, I remember that too.’

‘We should erect a plaque.’

‘In that case, there should be one on Westminster Abbey too, because you peed on me there, as well.’

He smiled at me fondly. ‘Nothing but the best for you, Max.’

We wandered along Borough High Street, down towards London Bridge.

‘It doesn’t actually look that different from the last time,’ said Tim, staring about him.

‘How would you know? You were unconscious for most of it.’

‘Self-defence. I took one look at you aiming that knife at my privates and chose unconsciousness.’

‘You fainted, you wuss.’

‘He should be so lucky,’ said Markham. ‘I remember going to Egypt with her once. One minute everything’s fine and the next minute she’s ripping off my clothes and chucking me in the Nile.’

‘For your own good,’ I said, indignantly.

‘Yeah, well, don’t get any ideas today.’

‘This was a voluntary assignment. You didn’t have to come.’

‘Like two historians and her...’ he nodded his head at Miss Lingoss, ‘are likely to get more than ten feet without needing the help of the Security Section.’

‘He does get agitated these days,’ said Peterson, thoughtfully. ‘Do you think married life is getting him down?’

We waited hopefully.

‘What gets me down,’ said Markham, heatedly, ‘is being out in the field with you three without a battalion of marines, a couple of tank regiments and air cover to back me up.’

Time to change the subject.

‘Anyway,’ said Peterson, looking up and down the street, ‘the buildings are much the same, the church is still here. The Tabard is still up there. Shame we missed Chaucer.’

‘Well, if you hadn’t contracted the plague then we wouldn’t have, would we?’

‘Are you ever going to let that drop?’

‘I wonder what happened to Brother Anselm.’

Brother Anselm was the monk who had given us shelter while Peterson recovered from what he still referred to as his ‘slight twinge of bubonic plague’. I remembered his bright, bird-like gaze and his gentle kindness.

Peterson smiled at his own memory and then said, ‘I’m sure he spent his days busily and happily and reaped his just reward in the end.’

‘I hope so.’

We walked down to the river, which was heaving with boats. In these days, the streets were so narrow and badly paved that the Thames was *the* major thoroughfare. Water boatmen ferried people around in wherries or skiffs. Up and down as well as from one side to another. Their boats ranged in size from flimsy-looking coracle-style craft to substantial boats that could take up to ten people. They were all doing a roaring trade because London still only had the one bridge and that was packed with people as well. It was obviously easier and quicker to move by river.

Heavily laden barges fought against the current as they ferried their commercial cargoes upstream. Occasionally, a horn would blast as someone important sought to force their way up or down river. There didn’t seem to be a traffic system of any kind. Boats milled

about in all directions. Boatmen roared abuse at each other and even their passengers exchanged insults and less than polite instructions to get out of the way.

The bigger boats were moored south of London Bridge. I stared downriver at the forest of masts, black against the sky.

‘Is that *the* London Bridge?’ said Evans, in awe. ‘Are those houses on it? Do people actually live on the bridge?’

‘They do,’ said Peterson. ‘And it’s not only houses, either. There’s a chapel, shops, a mill, even a gatehouse complete with drawbridge. May I draw your attention to the severed heads displayed up there?’

‘Cool,’ said Lingoss, squinting for a better view and we all stared at the massive structure that was London Bridge, with its nineteen gothic arches and seven-storey buildings, many of which overhung the river. Useful for a quick pee, I suppose. You just hung your bum out of the window.

‘It’s very top heavy,’ said Evans. ‘Why doesn’t it fall down?’

‘Well, bits of it do occasionally,’ said Peterson, ‘and there’s always rows about the upkeep. Hence the nursery rhyme.’

‘What nursery rhyme?’

He grinned. ‘You know the one. “London Bridge is Falling Down”. Great lumps of it are always dropping off and in 1281, Queen Eleanor, not a popular woman anyway, was accused of diverting money set aside for the upkeep of the bridge to her own personal use. Hence the “My fair lady” bit at the end.’

‘Is that what it means? My mum used to sing me that. And “Ring o’ Ring o’ Roses”.’

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘The Great Plague of 1665. “The pocket full of posies” or flowers, was supposed to keep the plague away, and the “Atishoo, atishoo, we all fall down” bit relates to the people dropping dead in the streets.’

Evans stared at us. ‘You’re kidding me.’

‘I kid you not. And I bet you played “Oranges and Lemons” when you were a kid. The song follows the route of condemned criminals as they’re marched through the streets to their execution. It names the churches on the way and ends with “Here comes the chopper to chop off your head.”’

‘Stop,’ said Evans, looking quite shocked. Our security team is a sensitive bunch.

‘Or,’ said Lingoss, entering into the spirit of things, ““Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” is Bloody Mary, torturing the Protestants. The garden was the graveyard, the silver bells were the thumbscrews, and the cockleshells apparently described the instruments they attached to the male genitalia.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Markham. ‘Because I always thought the rhyme

was about Mary Stuart – the Queen of Scots, and the pretty maids related to her ladies in waiting. You know, the four Marys.’

Peterson chipped in. ‘Well, I heard it was about...’

‘No. Shut up all of you,’ said Evans.’ I’m not standing here in the 17th century listening to two historians, a certifiable madwoman, and him...’ he nodded towards Markham, ‘arguing about genitals and executions. I need a drink.’

‘Excellent idea,’ said Peterson. ‘Let’s go to the Tabard.’

‘Finally,’ I said. ‘It’s only taken two hundred years.’

We stood in the corner of a packed courtyard. Markham, Peterson and Evans knocked back three tankards of small ale. The more intelligent sex drank from their water flasks. We spent an hour or so just watching the people go by, speculating on their identities and relationships, and enjoying ourselves so much that we were nearly late for the performance. Fortunately, since the streets were crowded, a lot of people were hurrying in the same direction, so we allowed ourselves to be carried along. The flag flew overhead, denoting there was to be a performance that day. And we would be there. I felt a shiver of excitement. Yes, I’d enjoyed my maternity leave, but until this moment, I hadn’t realised how much I’d missed my old life.

The Globe reared up in front of us, a big building by the standards of the day. After a dispute over the lease of their former theatre, the two Burbage brothers, Richard and Cuthbert, leased a plot of land on this side of the river, here in Southwark. They demolished their building, appropriately known as the Theatre, carried the timbers across the river, and rebuilt it, renaming it the Globe. Shakespeare himself bought a share in the building. Completed in 1599, it was a tremendous success, staging many of his plays until, during a performance of *Henry VIII*, a canon would misfire and the place would burn to the ground in a horrifyingly short time. It would be rebuilt and continue successfully until 1642, when the Puritans, as part of their mission to suck all the joy out of life, ordered its closure. It was demolished shortly afterwards.

There were people everywhere. *Hamlet* was obviously a very popular play. ‘I hope we can get in,’ I said, looking at the pushing crowds.

‘They’ll squeeze us in somehow,’ said Peterson, ushering us towards the entrance. ‘They can’t afford to lose box-office receipts.’

Our seating order had already been discussed. The posh people – Dr Bairstow, Mrs Enderby, Mrs Mack, Sykes, North and Major Guthrie were to be up in the gallery on the cushioned seats. At 6d per head. Or 6d per bottom, of course. Just to confuse things – a d is a penny. It’s from the Latin denarius. Anyway, for them the grand total was a massive 3 shillings. Having probably put himself well over budget, Dr

Bairstow had given the rest of us to understand that we would be down in the Yard with the peasants. Or stinkards as they were known on hot days.

Having had our pennies doled out to us – I don't know what he'd had to do to obtain authentic Elizabethan currency from our employers, the University of Thirsk, but obtain it he had – we stood in line. Admission to the Yard was only a penny, which in those days was still not cheap.

With a great flourish, Peterson, our designated banker, slipped two ha'pennies, two pennies and a tuppence into the box – hence the term, box office – and we were in.

We elbowed our way to a position close to the stage and looked around us for the others. At first, I thought I was just missing them in the crowd. I turned again. And again. No – we were the only team here.

I checked out the galleries, while Peterson, specially selected for his height, peered over people's heads, vainly looking for our colleagues.

'Can you see them anywhere?' I asked hopefully.

He shook his head. 'Nope. No sign.'

Great. The assignment barely begun and ten people missing already.

'It's like one of those Agatha Christie stories,' said Lingoss cheerfully, 'where everyone gets picked off one by one.'

I refused to panic. Remembering the crush around the theatre, I was convinced they'd still be outside, trying to get in. Even I couldn't lose ten people. Especially when those ten people included the Director, the Head of Security, the Head of Wardrobe, the Kitchen Supremo, the Head of R&D, the Librarian, and possibly worst of all, Miss North, who is related to most of the aristocrats in the country. She counts four MPs within her immediate family circle, but to do her justice, never lets it hold her back.

On the other hand, the theatre was filling up fast and there was still no sign of the other teams.

I opened my com. 'Dr Bairstow?'

There was a short pause before he responded. 'Ah, Dr Maxwell. We appear to be experiencing some difficulty, but I believe Major Guthrie has everything in hand.' He sounded breathless.

'Sir?'

'A very minor street altercation. Nothing of any great concern. Behind you, Mrs Mack!'

The link was severed.

I stared at Peterson in dismay. If the Respectable Team were in trouble, in what world-ending cataclysm could Sykes and the other

Weirdos possibly be involved?

With some misgivings, I began again. 'Miss Sykes?'

'Oh, hello Max.'

I did not make the mistake of assuming this cheerful greeting meant all was well. She'd be Hello Maxing me as the Apocalypse bore down upon us. In fact, there are those at St Mary's who feel that Sykes herself might be the Apocalypse.

'Where are you?'

'Still at the docks.'

'Why aren't you here at the theatre?'

Well, we're not too sure how it happened, but the professor wandered on to a ship bound for the New World and now they won't let him off.'

'What? Why?'

'I think they think he's their passenger and they're due to sail. You know, tides and everything.'

'Do *not* let that ship sail.'

'Don't worry – we're on it.'

'You'd better not be.'

'No sorry, I meant we're on the situation – not the ship. Although we are.'

'I'm sending assistance.' I closed the link and turned to Peterson, who was grinning.

'On my way,' he said.

'You too,' said Markham to Evans.

'Your instructions are clear. Get Professor Rapson off that boat...'

'Ship,' murmured Peterson.

'...without bloodshed or major damage to property.'

They pushed their way through the crowd, leaving Markham, Lingoss and me.

'And then there were three,' said Lingoss in a sinister voice. 'Who'll be the next to go, do you think?'

Actually, it was Markham, although we didn't know that yet.

I took lots of deep breaths, which didn't work at all, and considered the situation. Dr Bairstow and his team were embroiled in some sort of riot. Professor Rapson was possibly on his way to an American colony that had done nothing to deserve such a misfortune. I had no major fears for Dr Bairstow's team. They had Dr Bairstow and Major Guthrie. And should that front line crumble, they had Mrs Mack, former urban terrorist, on their side. They'd be fine.

For a moment I considered joining Sykes in her mission to separate the professor from his involuntary Atlantic cruise, but Peterson would sort things out. And Dr Bairstow had made it clear that my priority was to record the play. Personal interest aside, that was why we were

here and returning without footage was not an option. Dr Bairstow would frown at me, so whatever was going on outside, my job was to stay in the theatre. At my post. Mission controller going down with the ship. That sort of thing.

If the worst came to the worst – and it would because it always did – I could send Lingoss and Markham back for reinforcements. Counting on my fingers, I could muster Clerk, Bashford, Prentiss, Cox... Was that it? Unless I started pulling out kitchen and R&D staff, yes it was. And Rosie Lee, of course. No – no century deserved Rosie Lee.

I opened my com again.

‘Dr Bairstow? Report, please.’

‘Ah, Max. Good afternoon again.’

‘Sir, are you able to talk?’

Something shattered in the background.

‘Yes, of course. What is your problem?’

‘Actually sir, I was about to enquire whether you required assistance.’

‘I don’t believe so. Mrs Mack appears to be coping admirably.’

Mrs Mack had led the resistance at the Battersea Barricades. She’d fought alongside her husband. She’d made it. He hadn’t – falling to enemy fire only minutes before the ceasefire sounded. She was entitled to a chestful of medals that she never wore.

I felt the role of Dr Bairstow descend upon me. ‘Perhaps you could indicate where the problem lies, sir.’

‘It would appear that someone made the mistake of trying to pick Mrs Mack’s pocket.’

‘What an idiot. Is he still alive?’

‘Hard to tell. It would seem however, that he operated as part of a team, all of whom took exception to him being smacked between the eyes with a hastily snatched-up skillet. There has been a vigorous discussion over Mrs Mack’s unwillingness to assume the role of victim, and a market stall was inadvertently overturned. The sudden appearance of a group of somewhat rough looking fellows whose job it is, apparently, to maintain order within the market precincts, has provided enough distraction for us to be able to slip away. We hope to regroup outside and join you shortly.’

I felt a sudden anxiety. He wasn’t a young man. I struggled to express my concern in a tactful manner and failed. ‘Are you all right, sir?’

‘Oh yes,’ he said, sounding remarkably cheerful for him. ‘It’s just like old times. I feel quite refreshed.’

‘Is Major Guthrie still with you?’

‘In body, yes. In spirit, probably not all of him.’

‘Sir?’

‘A slight blow to the head. Nothing major.’

He paused for me to appreciate his little joke.

He doesn’t make that many – you can see why – and I had to take a moment to grope for a suitable response.

While I struggled for words, he said, ‘I believe I have made your instructions quite clear, Dr Maxwell. Your duty is to continue with this assignment. That is a direct order. We’ll never have another opportunity to do this.’

With deep, deep misgivings, I said, ‘Yes, sir,’ closed the link, and got on with my end of things.

The place was packed. Nearly every seat was taken in the galleries and they were still cramming them into the Yard. Markham, Lingoss and I linked arms and hung on to each other as the people around us jostled for the best positions.

The noise was overwhelming. The smell even worse. Without even trying, I could smell people, onions, tobacco, urine – because not everyone could be bothered to pop outside to relieve themselves – ale, and a nasty, stale chip-fat smell from the cheap oil they used for the torches. Hanging over everything was the smell of the nearby river. Two or three braziers had been set around the edges of the stage. I suspected someone had looked up at the overcast sky and planned ahead.

The man next to me was smoking a long-stemmed pipe, puffing clouds of smoke around both his head and mine. He wasn’t the only one. Tobacco was the latest craze and on this still day, the whole stage was wreathed in a blue fug of smoke.

Lingoss discreetly recorded the galleries and the posh people sitting therein. Theatres were popular with the nobility and Queen Elizabeth. Whom, sadly, we wouldn’t see today because when she wanted to watch a performance, the players went to her. We’d replay Lingoss’s footage when we returned home to try to identify anyone important here today. Not too easy with the ladies, most of whom were masked. Apparently, it’s perfectly OK to have your bosoms on display, but not your face.

I concentrated on the stage which projected out into the Yard. The black curtain informed us we were about to witness a tragedy. The curtain was flanked by two tall pillars, cleverly painted to look like marble.

The Globe could hold several thousand people – a lot for such a small area – and every single one of them appeared to be conversing at the top of their voice. Or gambling. Or playing cards. Prossies wandered through the crowds, blatantly touting for trade. I stood quietly among the thieves, apprentices, food-sellers, my colleagues,

cutpurses and all the other scum of the earth, everyone noisy and boisterous, and all looking forward to the afternoon's entertainment. The cobbles underfoot were rough and slippery. God knows what I was standing in. I hung on to Markham to avoid being knocked off my feet. Attending an Elizabethan drama appeared to require a great deal of stamina and strength.

I called up Peterson. 'What's happening?'

'Can't talk. Running.'

'To or from?'

The link went dead.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I took more deep breaths. Dr Bairstow dealt with this sort of thing all the time. No wonder he had no hair. I made a mental note to try to be more ... conventionally ... behaved in future. Out of consideration for the few wisps remaining around the back of his head.

Beside me, Markham and Lingoss, apparently not caring that the god of historians was pissing all over our chips again, were yelling excitedly at each other over the noise. Lingoss had Peterson's recorder discreetly palmed, all ready to begin. I considered splitting us up. Lingoss on one side of the stage, me on the other. To make sure we didn't miss anything. Lingoss had been a trainee historian until she left the programme to join the nutters in R&D. Where, I might as well say, she fitted right in. On the other hand, we were down to one security guard. We were better off staying together. It was going to be a long afternoon.

I closed my mind to whatever was going on outside the theatre – those were events I could do nothing about – and concentrated on the task in hand. *Hamlet*. We were going to see *Hamlet*. And William Shakespeare himself.

I grinned. Yeah – I love my job.

I didn't think, given the chaotic surroundings that the actors would be punctual, but they were. Three long blasts of a trumpet announced the performance was about to begin. Of course, they wouldn't want to hang around. *Hamlet* was four hours long. The nights were short in June, but although the Globe was open to the sky, the sides were high. The sun would soon disappear and the whole place would be plunged into shadowy gloom. It would grow cold. Yes, there were torches and braziers, but even so, compared with today's pampered theatre-goers, Elizabethan audiences were a tough crowd. In every sense.

The crowd fell nearly silent. There was a huge sense of anticipation.

I can't begin to describe how it felt to stand among people who

didn't know the story. Who didn't know how the play would end. Who hadn't had to sit at school, sleepy with boredom, as the class takes it in turns to read Shakespeare's lines, droning on and on, fulfilling the education authorities' apparent ambition to render Shakespeare as boring as possible. The people here had never watched one of those trendy TV productions where the play is – for some reason known only to the director – set in a modern South American dictatorship, or a Victorian cotton mill.

There was no scenery and few props. There was just the play itself. Everything was left to the imagination. The costumes, though, were magnificent, blazing with colour and fake jewels. If the sun had been shining, they would have been dazzling. Even on this dull day, they were brilliant. The stones in the costumes sparkled and flashed in the light from the braziers.

The actors were good. They were better than good. They were amazing. I don't know why I was surprised. I can only assume that I'd thought, given the lack of scenery and the smallness of the stage, that the performance would be ... well ... unsophisticated, and it wasn't. Far from it.

The story progressed at a tremendous rate and the theatre crackled with energy. The actors were never still, continually moving around the stage. All of us, wherever we were, standing or seated, were made to feel included in the drama. To feel a part of what was going on. It was a very personal, intimate performance. They strode around the stage, cloaks swirling, taking the story to the furthest reaches of the theatre, their voices perfectly audible over the continual hum of those watching who, themselves, were never still.

I don't know about anyone else, but I was right there with them. I was there at Elsinore, on a dark winter's night, standing on the battlements as the frightened guards discussed the mysterious appearance of the spectral apparition, building up to the moment of the Ghost's entrance. Played by William Shakespeare himself.

And then, suddenly, there he was, appearing mysteriously from the back of the stage, dark and unmoving. The audience gasped. Like everyone else, I craned to see his face, lost in the shadows of his deep hood. I hopped with frustration. I hoped Lingoss, taller than me, was getting better shots. If everything had gone according to plan, there would have been historians at strategic points all around the theatre, capturing every moment, every line, every gesture, but they, of course, were all off irresponsibly sailing away to the New World or recklessly starting a riot in the market. You just can't get the staff these days.

Unlike the rest of the glittering cast, the Ghost was enveloped in voluminous draperies of grey, under which was just the hint of a

breastplate, to denote his armour. I don't know what sort of material they'd used for his cloak, but even the slightest movement caused it to flutter away from his body, giving the appearance of wavering transparency. On this dull day, the effect was excellent. Mrs Enderby would be thrilled. Or would have been had she actually been here.

I was right there again when Horatio brought Hamlet to see the Ghost for himself. I watched the two of them exit, pause, to signify a new scene, and then reappear almost immediately.

The crowd shuddered with delicious horror at the Ghost's words of murder and incest, and if Markham had got any closer he would have been up on the stage with them.

The story thundered on. The Ghost admitted he was Hamlet's father and charged him to avenge his murder. All around me, people were nodding in agreement. This was accepted ghostly behaviour. The themes of the play were recognisable in any age. Murder and revenge.

I began to calm down a little. We were getting some great shots. Peterson and Sykes would sort out Professor Rapson. The combination of Dr Bairstow and Major Guthrie was unbeatable and, even should the unthinkable happen and they fail, there was always Mrs Mack. And actually, now I came to think of it, I wouldn't cross Mrs Enderby, either. She has a nasty repertoire of hard stares. And then there was Miss North. The universe had been smoothing her family's path to success for centuries. She was definitely not one to let anyone or anything stand between her and her goal. They'd be fine.

We'd be fine.

Everything would be fine.

And right at that very moment, Shakespeare burst into flames.

My first thought was that we were witnessing a case of spontaneous human combustion and how disappointed Professor Rapson would be to have missed it, and then common sense kicked in.

I'd been so involved in the various St Mary's crises – to say nothing of the play – that I hadn't notice the wind was getting up, sending dark clouds moving atmospherically across the sky. With a dramatic gesture of departure that sent his draperies flying out around him, the Ghost had flung out his arm. The movement, together with a sudden gust of wind, picked up the gauzy material of his cloak and blew it across one of the braziers. The next minute, Shakespeare – oh my God, *the* Shakespeare – was alight.

For a moment, everyone stood, frozen. Someone screamed. We stood on the brink of mass panic. The theatre was made entirely of wood. Fire exits hadn't been invented yet. A mass stampede would

probably kill more people than any fire.

But not today. Before anyone else could move, Markham had vaulted up onto the stage and cannoned into Shakespeare, knocking him to the ground. I just had time to think – oh my God, that's *Shakespeare*, for God's sake be careful with him – when he began to roll him over, beating out the flames with his bare hands. The classic Stop, Drop and Roll. We're good at that. Markham can do it in his sleep. I scrabbled in my basket, pulled out my cloak, and tossed it up to him. He used it to envelop the Ghost and an instant later, the flames were out.

The crowd applauded wildly. I don't know if they thought it was part of the play. Someone shouted something I didn't catch, and the pair of them, Markham and Shakespeare, must have been lying on a trapdoor because, suddenly, they both disappeared from view.

'And then there were two,' intoned Lingoss.

And with that unerring instinct for knowing exactly when his staff are cantering along the catastrophe curve towards disaster, Dr Bairstow spoke in my ear.

'Good afternoon, Dr Maxwell.'

'Oh, hello sir. How is your riot progressing?'

'A most satisfactory resolution, thank you. We expect to be with you very soon. How is the play?'

I stared at the spot where I'd last seen Markham and Shakespeare. 'I'm sorry sir, I can't hear you very well. There's a lot of noise here. I'll try again in a minute.'

I closed the link on him. In itself a capital offence.

'Bloody hell,' said Lingoss beside me. 'Did you just hang up on the Boss?'

'Of course not,' I said, unconvincingly and inaccurately. 'Carry on recording, please Miss Lingoss.'

I wasn't the only one promoting the whole 'show must go on' scenario. Hamlet himself, taking one or two deep breaths, turned to Marcellus and Horatio, themselves realistically pale and shocked – as well they might be since their foremost playwright and actor/shareholder had just gone up in flames – and the play continued.

'I hope to God he's all right,' said Lingoss, anxiously, and I was pretty sure she wasn't talking about Markham. 'This is bloody Bill the Bard, you know.' Just in case I'd forgotten.

'We'll know in a minute,' I said. 'The Ghost speaks again very soon.'

And indeed, we were approaching that moment. Hamlet, having entreated his friends to silence, instructs them to swear an oath on his sword. They pause, uncertain and afraid, and, according to the play, the unearthly voice of the Ghost filters up, supposedly from the

underworld, but in this case from below the stage, commanding them to swear.

There was a long silence. No voice from anywhere, never mind the underworld.

‘Shit,’ said Lingoss, and then...

‘Swear,’ boomed an unearthly voice, resonant with the terrors of Hell.

Lingoss stiffened. ‘I know that voice.’

‘Swear,’ intoned the voice sepulchrally, throbbing with all the despair and grief and sorrow and desolation of a lost soul. And with a bit of a Bristol accent.

‘We all know that voice,’ I said, through clenched teeth.

‘Swear by his sword,’ commanded the eldritch voice, rising in tone and pitch and finishing on a strangled note that even a banshee with its balls trapped in a vice couldn’t have achieved. All around the stage people stepped back, and on the stage itself, Hamlet’s companions completed the scene with almost indecent haste.

‘Oh my God,’ said Lingoss to me, agitated, but still recording I was pleased to note. ‘What did he think he was doing?’

The scene ended and the actors swept from the stage.

Time to find out.

I opened my com and taking advantage of the milling crowd said quietly, ‘Mr Markham. Report.’

‘It’s fine. Everything’s fine.’

This is St Mary’s speak for ‘Everything’s gone tits up, but I’m trying to sort things out so leave me alone to get on with it.’

‘Do you require any assistance?’

‘No. No. Everything’s fine.’

I stared at the stage as if I could see through the wood.

Dr Bairstow’s voice sounded in my ear. ‘Dr Maxwell, we appear to have lost contact.’

‘Really, sir?’

‘Report, please.’

In situations like this – the ones where I’m not quite sure what’s going on – it is important to report as fully and clearly as possible without actually saying anything at all.

‘It’s fine,’ I said, borrowing from the master. ‘Everything’s fine.’

There was a short, disbelieving silence and then he closed the link.

‘Just act normally,’ said Markham, in my ear again. ‘Everything’s fine.’

‘Stop saying that.’

‘Well it is.’

Where are you?

‘I’m carrying Shakespeare out from under the stage.’

‘Oh my God, is he badly burned?’

‘No, not at all. His costume is, but he’s fine.’

I was puzzled. ‘So why are you carrying him?’

‘He’s just a little bit limp at the moment.’

‘He’d better not be. The Ghost appears again later on.’

‘That won’t be a problem.’

I stopped. Did that mean that Shakespeare would have recovered by then? Or that someone was available to carry on? I wish people would report more clearly.

‘Was that you just now?’

Silence.

I ground my teeth again. ‘Was it?’

‘I’m not sure what the correct answer is to that one, so I’m not saying anything. Anyway, I can’t talk now – I’m heaving a living legend around and I need to concentrate on what I’m doing.’

I took a moment. This was Markham. Himself a living legend, but for completely the wrong reasons. On the other hand, he usually managed to emerge from whatever crisis he had embroiled himself in more or less unscathed. I should let him get on with it.

‘Do whatever you think necessary,’ I said, mentally crossing my fingers.

‘Okey dokey,’ he said cheerfully and, if Major Guthrie had heard him say that, he’d suffer for it big time later on.

Guiltily, I remembered my other crisis. The one that didn’t involve the world’s most famous writer going up in flames.

‘Miss Sykes, report.’

‘Oh, hello Max.’

As always, she sounded delighted to hear from me. I wasn’t fooled for an instant. Who did she think invented that voice?

‘Report.’

‘Well, there’s good and there’s bad. The original passenger has turned up and is accusing the professor of stealing his berth. He’s quite indignant about it, actually. The captain and his first mate aren’t actually on the ship at the moment. Popular opinion has it they’re out rogering as many barmaids as they can find in preparation for the long voyage ahead, but the rest of the crew are accusing the professor of trying to stow away. Which I gather is quite a serious crime, although since he’s been marching around the deck talking to all the sailors, demanding to know how everything works, and showing them new knots he’s invented, there hasn’t been a lot of stowing going on. I can’t honestly see how they’ll make the charge stick. Can I just ask – what’s keelhauling?’

Without thinking, I said, ‘A vicious form of maritime punishment mentioned as early as 800 BC, involving dragging the offender under

the keel of a boat. Survival is rare – death being due either to drowning, or having clothes, skin, arms, legs et cetera, ripped off by the barnacles growing on the ship's bottom. Please use every effort to ensure that does not happen to the professor.' I played out possible scenarios in my head. 'Or Dr Dowson, either.'

'I'll do my best,' she said, cheerfully, 'but I'm just a girl. No one's taking any notice of me.'

'You underestimate your abilities, Miss Sykes.'

'True. And the second mate appears to be extremely fond of the miracle fluid known as rum. I'm sure I can persuade him to let us all go. Everyone's quaffing away, including the real passenger for the New World – and a right miserable bugger he looks. I can feel the War of Independence coming on just by looking at him.'

She broke off and I heard an unearthly cry.

'What the hell?'

'Just a couple of passing seagulls who just popped in, had a quick quaff and are now unable to get airborne again. How are things with you?'

'Absolutely fine,' I said, through gritted teeth.

'Oh dear. Never mind.'

Long experience enabled me to identify the exact moment Dr Bairstow and his party assumed their seats in the gallery. The faint commotion caused by him staring at people long enough for them to move up and make room for him was lost in the general hubbub around me, but I knew he was there.

I ground my teeth, ignored his penetrating stare and turned back to the stage.

The play was resuming. Scenes came and went. I can only assume that players set fire to themselves all the time, because no one seemed in the slightest bit perturbed. Actors swirled around the stage. Hamlet went not so quietly mad. Glittering costumes mingled with glittering words. The smoke from braziers and a hundred pipes made my eyes sting. I shifted from foot to foot, half discomfort, half anxiety. What was happening? Why hadn't Markham returned? Were they still under the stage? How badly was Shakespeare injured? Was Markham being held responsible? Right now, not ten feet away, Shakespeare could be breathing his last.

I broke my self-imposed rule.

'Markham. Talk to me. Are you being cut into tiny pieces?'

'No, I'm having a beer.'

Of course he bloody was. Any concern I might have felt took wings and flew away.

'What about Shakespeare? He's on again in Act Three.'

'He's not going to make it.'

‘He must.’

‘He can’t. He can’t even focus, let alone stand up.’

‘Is there an understudy?’

A long silence. ‘No.’

I gave him my version of an even longer silence.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yep.’

‘You’re absolutely sure?’

‘Well, there’s a young lad here, but he plays Gertrude as well, and they’re on at the same time.’

I sighed. Heavily. I was doing that a lot this afternoon. Some holiday this was turning out to be. ‘Have you still got my cloak?’

‘It’s here. Stop panicking.’

‘You’ve got my chocolate.’

There was an oddly long pause. ‘Not any longer.’

‘Is it melted?’

Another oddly long pause.

‘Yes.’

I could feel Dr Bairstow’s potential wrath hanging over me like the Sword of Damocles. Should I recall Markham? There must surely be an understudy somewhere in this theatre.

He took the matter out of my hands. ‘There’s nothing you can do, Max. Just relax and enjoy the show.’

I might as well. Everyone else was. All around me, people were buying pies, arguing with their friends, rolling the dice, or booking a prostitute. I felt quite angry on the actors’ behalf. Didn’t people know what was happening here? How important this moment was? And here they all were, carrying on as if the whole thing was simply some sort of massive social event, designed for nothing more than to see and be seen.

Until that moment. That magical moment.

Hamlet, wrapped in a cloak and his own thoughts, strode to the edge of the stage, and paused, staring at his own feet. Standing motionless, he stared. And stared. Gradually, the noise of the crowd died away as everyone turned to watch. The background noises were hushed. Prossies went unrented. I swear, even outside, the clatter of cartwheels on cobbles, the shouts, the everyday noises all fell away. For all I know, even mighty Father Thames paused in anticipation. Complete silence fell, and still Hamlet stared at his feet, unmoving. The silence stretched to an impossible length. People began to look at each other in puzzlement.

‘Oh my God,’ whispered Lingoss. ‘He’s forgotten his lines.’

No, he hadn’t.

Slowly, he lifted his head and swept his gaze over the upturned

faces around him. No one moved. No one spoke. The whole world waited.

‘To be, or not to be,

That is the question.’

A kind of sigh rippled around the Yard – and the galleries, too. I felt my heart thump in my chest. I had an overwhelming desire to burst into tears.

He completed the soliloquy, every word taking flight and soaring to the heavens above. Like golden birds. When he finished, there was a moment of respectful silence and then the sound of tumultuous, rapturous applause. Even the people in the galleries stamped their feet. I clapped until my hands hurt, tears running down my cheeks.

Burbage stood, head lowered for a moment, and then he placed his hand on his heart, bowed deeply just once, swept his cloak around him in a grand gesture and the play continued.

There have been some wonderful moments in my life and that was well up with the best of them. I wiped my face on my sleeve, realised I’d completely forgotten my aching legs and feet, slapped another memory stick into my recorder and carried on.

Until two scenes later and the return of the Ghost who, this time, appeared in his nightgown. I wondered if the part had called for this or whether they were improvising after his original costume had gone up in flames. Whatever the reason, it’s become traditional. If you’ve ever wondered why, in Act III Scene IV, after appearing heavily cloaked and in his armour, the Ghost turns up in his nightgown, it’s because he set fire to himself in a previous scene. Beside me, Lingoss stiffened and said in a strangled whisper, ‘Max...’

Because without his all-concealing cloak this was, at last, our opportunity to see Shakespeare himself, to compare the real man to the very few portraits of him. To be able to say, once and for all – this is the face of William Shakespeare. My palms were sticky. I checked my recorder for the umpteenth time. This was it.

Except that it wasn’t. It wasn’t Shakespeare, I mean. This Ghost was a good half a head shorter than the previous version, and bore a startling resemblance to Mr Markham.

‘*Shit,*’ said Lingoss, which pretty much summed it all up. ‘What is he *doing?*’

Why does everyone always think I know what’s going on?

I could feel Dr Bairstow’s eyes boring into the back of my head. I refused to look around, concentrating instead on formulating plans to spend the rest of my life in this century.

Back on the stage, Hamlet has killed Polonius in front of his mother and, even more emotional than usual – which is saying a lot – is trying to show her the Ghost, terrifying her even further. She flees around the stage, as Hamlet, increasingly desperate and increasingly mad, tries to seize her hands and force her to confront a spectre she cannot believe exists.

All this was happening at the front of the stage. So far, the Ghost had wisely stayed well back, a silent and motionless figure. For some reason, the effect was far more sinister than if he had gallivanted around the stage waving his arms and wailing. Which, I admit, had been my second fear. My first fear, of course, being what Dr Bairstow was going to say when all this was over. However, back to the plot.

The Ghost was about to speak.

I held my breath.

In a voice resonating with sadness and despair, he spoke.

‘Do not forget. This visitation

Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.

But look, amazement on thy mother sits.’

As well it might since the young lad playing the queen had suddenly found himself being addressed by a complete stranger.

‘O step between her and her fighting soul.

Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.

Speak to her, Hamlet.’

To no avail. Gertrude cannot see the Ghost. After a final moment of silent anguish, conveyed, according to the Markham School of Acting, by him clutching at his bosom with both hands, the Ghost drifts away, never, thank God, to be seen again.

A polite round of applause accompanied his exit.

I realised I’d been holding my breath.

‘Hey, Max.’

Don’t ever tell Peterson I’d completely forgotten about him.

‘Tim? Where are you? What’s happening?’

You’re supposed to say ‘Report’. It doesn’t always happen.

‘Bit of a full-scale war here. I’m pulling everyone out.’

I could hear a woman shrieking.

I asked who that was, because he does have a tendency to get himself involved with difficult women.

‘Now we know why the original passenger was so keen to get to the New World, Max. His wife and seventeen children have just turned up. She’s hanging around his neck like a dead albatross. The kids are screaming. He’s alternately trying to pretend he’s never seen any of them before and shouting at the crew to cast off. The crew are laughing their heads off. It’s all happening. Hang on, she’s wants me to ... No, I will not hold the baby. No. Let go of me. Get off. For God’s sake, madam, will you kindly desist. Thank you. Max, stop laughing.’

‘It’s good training for when you’re married.’

‘I should live that long. Look out, Atherton, she’s heading your way. Watch out for that baby. It’s leaking at both ends. Sorry Max – have to go. Speak to you later.’

It was all right for Peterson. He only had an angry ship’s crew, two uncontrollable academics, Psycho Psykes, and an enraged wife and her seventeen children to contend with. I didn’t have to turn around to know that Dr Bairstow was glaring balefully at the back of my head.

‘Dr Maxwell.’

‘Oh, hello, sir,’ I said cheerfully, grasping the bull by his horns. ‘Everything all right up there?’

‘We are all present and correct, yes.’

‘Jolly good,’ I said, ignoring the implication that my team wasn’t, and moved slightly to my left to get a better shot of Hamlet ranting about something to someone.

‘Is there something you want to tell me?’

‘I don’t think so sir. Everything seems to be under control here.’

‘We shall speak later,’ he promised and closed his link.

The play cruised smoothly on – which was more than I was doing – the final scene especially providing a body count high enough to compare favourably with that of a modern day blockbuster. The final tally:

The Queen – poisoned by the king, her husband.

Ophelia – drowned.

Polonius – stabbed through the arras by Hamlet.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – both beheaded by the English.

Laertes – stabbed and poisoned by Hamlet.

Claudius – stabbed and poisoned by Hamlet.

And Hamlet himself – goes mad and then, continuing the established theme – stabbed and poisoned by Laertes.

A dark day for Denmark.

I was on the verge of calling Peterson. His silence was either a very good thing or a very bad thing – but if he needed assistance he would call me. Or so I told myself.

The players took their bows with Markham, obviously aware that

the sands of his life were running out, trying to stand at the back and look inconspicuous – something that was never going to happen in any century.

And then it was time to go.

I turned away from the stage and, not without misgivings, opened my com. ‘Tim, what’s happening?’

‘All present and correct. Well, mostly correct. A few bumps and bruises.’

‘You’ve been fighting?’

‘Only a little. Most of the damage was done when Keller tripped over a coil of rope and brought a couple of sailors down with him. They were at some pains to point out they weren’t those sort of boys and we had to run for it.’

‘Bloody hell, where are you now?’

‘In the Tabard. We gave up on Shakespeare. Some days you can have too much drama. We’ve pooled our pennies instead, and there’s a lake of ale on the table in front of us. What’s happening with you?’

‘Shakespeare set fire to himself and Markham made his stage debut.’

He whistled. ‘OK, you win. Much more disastrous than a couple of bloody noses and a crushed codpiece. How about Dr Bairstow?’

‘Up in the gallery.’

‘Isn’t there a song about that?’

‘How much beer have you actually had?’

‘Hardly any at all,’ he said unconvincingly. ‘So what are you up to, then?’

‘I, along with Miss Lingoss, whose behaviour has been exemplary, I might add...’ We both paused to savour this unaccustomed phrase, ‘...have been concentrating on the real assignment. Which is more than can be said for the rest of this bloody unit.’

I closed the link. All right, harsh words, but what would you have said?

It took us over an hour to get out of the theatre. No one seemed in any hurry to leave. There was food, drink and company. Why would anyone want to be anywhere else? The actors jumped down off the stage and mingled with the crowd, slapping backs and cadging drinks. I looked for Shakespeare. A brief glimpse, even at this late stage, might go a long way towards placating Dr Bairstow, but I couldn’t see him anywhere. Sometimes I think the god of historians’ job description needs upgrading. Along with the actual god of historians.

Markham, grinning like an idiot, pushed his way through the crowd, pausing only to extricate himself from a not so young but very affectionate lady, who seemed to think physical contact of any kind

constituted some sort of binding contract. We watched his struggles without sympathy and ignored his pathetic appeals for help.

Eventually, he emerged beside me, restored to what, for him, passed as normal, and bubbling with excitement. He passed me the sorry remains of my cloak.

‘Max, did you see me?’

‘Sorry, what?’

‘Did you see me?’

‘When?’

‘I was on stage. I was the Ghost. Did you see me?’

‘You were the Ghost?’

‘Yes. Did you see me?’

‘No, sorry. Must have missed that bit.’

‘What?’

‘Problem with my recorder. Maybe Lingoss got you.’

He turned to Lingoss. ‘Did you get me?’

Lingoss was shouldering her pack. ‘Get what?’

‘Me. On stage. I was the Ghost. I saved the day.’

‘When?’

‘Just now,’ he said, hopping up and down with frustration. ‘I was the Ghost. In the play. The one you’ve just seen. Today.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. My feet were killing me. These cobbles are murder to stand on for so long. I took a break and sat down. Must have missed it. Try Max.’

He turned back to me. ‘You *must* have seen me.’

‘What are you talking about? I’m seeing you now.’

‘No, not now. Then.’

‘When?’

‘When I was on the stage.’

‘What stage?’

We could probably have gone on like this all day, but at this point, he realised we were winding him up.

‘You’re right,’ he said, casually, taking his pack from Lingoss. ‘No big deal.’

Turning away, and the very picture of guilty furtiveness – although to be fair, that is his normal expression a lot of the time – he slipped something into his pack.

‘What was that?’ I said, because we’re not allowed to pick up souvenirs and he knew it.

‘Nothing,’ he said nonchalantly, thus confirming my worst fears. ‘Shall we go? Don’t want to be late at the rendezvous point.’

I held out my hand. ‘Give it to me.’

‘What?’ he said, grinning and getting his own back.

‘The thing you just slipped into your pack.’

‘What pack?’

‘The one that will be referred to as Exhibit A when I’m being tried for your murder.’

He grinned and pulled out a recorder, wagging his eyebrows at us.

We stared at it, oblivious of the people pushing past us on their way out.

I said hoarsely, ‘What did you get?’

‘No idea. Exciting, isn’t it?’

I nodded at the recorder. ‘Put that away. Very carefully. Miss Lingoss?’

‘Yes, Max.’

‘Your duty is clear. Should anything happen to Mr Markham between here and St Mary’s, your one and only function is to save that recorder at all costs.’

‘Hey,’ protested Markham.

‘Understood,’ said Lingoss.

The first person I saw outside was Peterson, unscathed and unperturbed. Beside him, Miss Sykes, peered about her with bright-eyed curiosity. Professor Rapson and Dr Dowson stood nearby with Atherton and Evans stationed one on each side, ready to head them off at the pass should they stray, or intercede should they come to blows. Every single one of them looked as if butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths. And all of them reeked of rum.

Peterson patted the pouch holding his recorder. ‘We’ve got some really good stuff here. You?’

This casual reference to my recording marathon did not endear him to me in any way.

‘Meh,’ I said. ‘Just the usual stuff. Shakespeare, Burbage, deathless prose – same old, same old.’

He opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment, Dr Bairstow hove into view, his team trailing behind him, with Major Guthrie bringing up the rear and a definite contender in the Best Black Eye of the Year competition.

The curfew wasn’t until nine o’clock but the sun had long since disappeared. I flung my scorched and burned cloak around my shoulders, ignored Mrs Enderby’s reproachful stare, performed a quick head count and ordered everyone back to the pod.

Dr Bairstow said very little as we made our way back through the darkening streets. Southwark was, if anything, even livelier in the evening than during the day. Shouts and laughter could be heard through open doors and windows. Some torches and lanterns were being lit, but most streets and narrow alleyways were in deep shadow, and they really weren’t places where we wanted to be.

Snatches of conversation drifted back to me.

‘It’s a kind of a cross between a clove and hitch. I shall call it the clit.’

‘Couldn’t think of anything else to do than shove it down the front of my trousers...’

‘And then Mrs Mack fetched him an almighty wallop...’

‘Scurvy, of course, which is why Americans refer to us as Limeys. Interesting isn’t it that in these times one could journey to and from America far more easily than in our time today...’

I stood at the bottom of the ramp and counted them all into the pod, congratulated myself on not having lost anyone, and ruthlessly pulled rank to be first into the toilet. The bloody play was four hours long, for crying out loud, and while everyone else might have been happy to splash against the wall, I wasn’t. Lingoss, herself obviously not a happy wall-splasher either, was hard on my heels.

I gave the word, the world went white, and still Dr Bairstow said nothing.

We landed with barely a bump. I made everyone stand still for decontamination, watching carefully as the cold blue light played over us all. Everyone was still babbling away about their own afternoon. The only person saying nothing was Dr Bairstow. It was very unnerving.

The ramp came down. Leon entered, smiled for me alone, bent over the console, and began to shut things down.

I don’t know why I thought we might get away with it. We never had before. Just as he was leaving TB2, Dr Bairstow turned and spoke at last.

‘As soon as you have finished in Sick Bay, Doctors Maxwell, Peterson, and Mr Markham, please report to me in my office.’

I sighed.

We crept into Sick Bay and tried to hang around at the back of the queue – there were many people to process and I think our plan was to get lost in the crowd – but Helen Foster hoicked us to the head of the queue, threw us through the scanner and pronounced us fit for purpose. Well, no less fit for purpose than we were before, she said, and to get out of here now because she was very busy and had better things to do than hospitalise Markham for a couple of really very minor burns so stop waving them around Markham because no one was interested, and there was no point in Peterson hanging about because she was far too busy to talk to him at the moment, and why was Maxwell still here?

We know when we’re not wanted.

We trailed to Dr Bairstow’s office, hoping for divine intervention on the way, but we’d obviously used up our quota for the day, arriving at his door completely unengulfed by catastrophe. As

Markham said gloomily, for a bunch of people overtaken by disaster far more often than was good for them, where was a good crisis when you needed one?

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘I don’t know why I’m standing around like a criminal. While everyone around me was stowing away on ships or brawling in the market or bursting into flames, I was the one who continued with the mission.’

‘That’s a very good point, Max,’ said Peterson. ‘And I saved the New World from Professor Rapson.’

‘Another good point. Lead with that.’

We both looked at Markham. ‘I’m the The Man Who Saved Shakespeare,’ he said, and we could hear the capital letters.

‘Leave this to me,’ I said, and they indicated their enthusiastic willingness to do that very thing.

We waited quietly until the Boss turned up, fresh and smart in clean clothes while we were still in our tatty Tudor gear. We followed him into his office, Markham taking care to display his burns prominently.

There’s an accepted routine for this sort of thing. Dr Bairstow sits in silent majesty and the offenders – that’s almost always the three of us, me, Peterson and Markham with a varying supporting cast – issue the standard blanket denial, offer up an unconvincing explanation, attempt to justify our actions, accept our reprimand, and hasten to the bar to nurse our wounds and our pride and have a well-deserved drink.

But maybe not today.

Dr Bairstow sat behind his desk. He didn’t have enough hair to look dishevelled. He could stand in a Force Eight gale and literally not turn a hair, but he did have a certain battered look about him. His lip was split and a rather impressive bruise was forming under his left eye. I opened my mouth to make a bid for the moral high ground, but he beat me to it.

‘Why is it that after every assignment I look up to see you three standing in front of me?’ Which since he’d particularly requested the pleasure of our company seemed a little unfair.

We indicated our own mystification.

‘So,’ he said, ‘and I’m sure you will correct me if I go astray, Professor Rapson inadvisedly boards a boat...’

‘Ship,’ murmured Peterson.

‘...bound for the New World. An altercation ensues and your solution, Dr Peterson, is to ply everyone present with cheap rum, which delays the sailing sufficiently to give the original passenger’s wife and family time to intercept the boat...’

‘Ship.’

‘...remove said passenger and restore him to the bosom of his apparently enormous family.’

‘His enormous *grateful* family, sir.’

‘I gather that under the mellowing influence of a great deal of alcohol, moves to keelhaul Professor Rapson were circumvented.’

‘I think they were more of a threat than a promise and...’

‘Where was Miss Sykes during all this? And don’t tell me she wasn’t there?’

‘Miss Sykes heroically undertook to induce the second mate to release the professor.’

‘He was in the brig?’

‘Not as such, sir. He was actually sitting on a coil of rope demonstrating the er ... the um ... his new knot to an admiring crowd.’

‘And Mr Keller? What was the Security Section’s role in this?’

‘Mr Keller suffered a slight loss of balance – no sea legs, sir – inadvertently falling on a couple of seamen. It was later agreed that his actions had been misinterpreted and there was general mirth and merriment over the misunderstanding.’

Peterson beamed at Dr Bairstow. Who turned his attention to me.

‘And you Dr Maxwell?’

‘I recorded the entire production sir,’ I said firmly, feeling that not enough attention was being paid to the one person who had fulfilled her part of the assignment. ‘All bladder-straining four hours of it, together with footage of the audience, paying particular attention to the galleries.’

I placed my and Lingoss’s recorders on the desk in front of him and stepped back, oozing virtuousness and eagerness to please. Both Peterson and Markham refused to catch my eye.

He turned his beaky nose towards Markham.

‘So, Mr Markham, it would seem that when I eventually take a moment from assisting my colleagues in the execution of their duties at the street market and request an update on the assignment, I find that, for some reason, William Shakespeare is engulfed in flames and that you have appropriated his role for yourself.’

I thought he was slightly overstating events but refrained from saying so. Markham could usually look after himself.

‘Well, Mr Markham?’

‘It all happened so suddenly, sir. One minute the Ghost is denouncing his brother and his queen and exhorting Hamlet to seek revenge and the next minute he’s a raging inferno.’

Another one slightly overstating events. I stood back to let the two of them tough it out.

‘William Shakespeare was on fire?’

‘Not all of him, sir. Only his clothes.’

‘And you extinguished the flames and possibly saved his life.’

‘I did, sir,’ he said, casually moving his burns to an even more prominent position and wincing with bravely concealed pain.

‘You interfered with History. Are you aware of our Standing Orders?’

‘Very much so, sir. Major Guthrie quotes them at me on a regular basis, but I didn’t interfere, sir. We have no reports of William Shakespeare being injured or disfigured in a fire. In fact, he lives for many years and goes on to write even more plays. You could say sir, that it was necessary for me to interfere so that History *wasn’t* changed.’

He had a point. History is like a living organism and it will always protect itself. If it thinks, even for one moment, that someone or something is about to alter events that have already taken place then, the offending virus – or historian as we prefer to be known – is wiped out without a second thought. The fact that our Mr Markham still lived and breathed was evidence that – just for once – he was completely blameless.

Dr Bairstow shifted in his chair. ‘To use a word in keeping with the situation – what exactly was your *role* in all of this?’

Markham assumed his hurt expression – the one resembling an abandoned puppy in a snowstorm. ‘Well, sir, if you mean did I actually set Shakespeare on fire then no, I didn’t. The *part I played* – to continue your brilliant example, sir,’ he said, slathering on the butter, ‘consisted simply of *acting* to assess the situation, identifying the appropriate measures to be taken, *staging* the Stop, Drop and Roll *programme*, and assisting the stricken Shakespeare to *exit* to an area under the stage so that I could *perform* any further assistance.’

‘Which consisted of appropriating the role of Ghost.’

Markham beamed again and nodded.

‘But what of the understudy? How in God’s name did you ever induce him to allow you to do such a thing?’

‘I... um ... I offered him something in exchange.’

My mind boggled. I couldn’t, offhand, think of anything Markham could have had that the understudy would have wanted. We’re not allowed to take anything with us. And then – of course – my chocolate. He’d bartered my bar of chocolate. The one hidden in my cloak. True, by that point it might have been a little battered and melted, but even so ... I took a moment to imagine the impact of a brick-sized bar of fruit and nut on someone who’d never in their life tasted anything like it. The Ghost was not a major role. Only half a dozen lines – in exchange for a giant slab of the stuff? Of course he’d allowed it.

‘What could you possibly possess that would induce him to do such a thing?’

I stiffened. While taking my own lunch was perfectly acceptable, a great block of as yet undiscovered chocolate was almost certainly not. What would Markham say?

I needn’t have worried.

Contriving to look even more abandoned than ever, Markham smiled reassuringly. ‘The object concerned was completely biodegradable sir. Nothing to worry about at all.’

‘Astonishingly, this blithe assurance does nothing to lessen my anxiety.’

‘Your groundless anxiety, sir.’ He beamed in what he probably thought was a comforting manner.

‘So you are telling me that the Ghost’s unearthly utterances from beneath the stage and his final but very public appearance in Act Three – all that was you?’

I could see Markham considering possible answers, rejecting them all and settling for the uninflammatory truth.

‘If you mean my inspired recreation of a restless soul in torment, unable to rest in peace, languishing in the depths of anguish and despair, and desperate to convey his message from beyond the grave then yes, all that was me, sir.’

Dr Bairstow began to align the files on his desk. Never a good sign.

‘I find myself quite bewildered, Mr Markham. It would seem that, thanks to your admittedly timely intervention, while the damage to his clothing was fairly major, the damage to Shakespeare himself was so minor as to be non-existent. I am anxious, therefore, to learn the compelling reasons for your subsequent appropriation of the role of the Ghost, which thereby deprived the audience – and me – of the pleasure of watching the greatest playwright the world has ever known perform his own lines.’

Wow. He was really annoyed. All the signs were there. Long sentences. Polysyllabic words. Faultless grammar. Perfect punctuation. Dr Bairstow was – not to put too fine a point on it – right royally pissed at Markham.

Who shifted his feet, uneasily. ‘Well, it wasn’t so much the fire that did the damage, sir. The thing is, I might have dropped him.’

The files were now aligned with ominously millimetric precision. ‘You *dropped* Shakespeare?’

‘Only slightly, sir.’

‘Do you mean you only dropped part of him, or that you dropped all of him, but not from a great height?’

‘Both, sir. There was a step which, in the agitation of the moment, I didn’t notice, and he went down with a bit of a crash.’

Running out of files, Dr Bairstow gripped the edge of his desk. ‘You knocked Shakespeare unconscious? And do not say “Not all of him.”’

Obviously not feeling able to comply, Markham said nothing.

‘Answer me.’

‘Well, I didn’t, sir. Knock all of him unconscious, I mean. He was just a bit wobbly and the bit was coming up where he’s supposed to intone, “Swear,” in horrid tones from underneath the stage, and even after an *interval* to recover, he really was all over the place, so *acting* in a *prompt* and timely manner, I did it. And no one noticed. And the show must go on, sir,’ he added, laying on the jam as well as the butter. ‘And then he threw up. All over himself, sir, and you have to admit it would have been a bit of a disaster if he’d done that on the stage. I’m not sure they’d invented ectoplasm in the 1600s.’

‘Charles Richet, 1905,’ murmured Peterson, electing to join the conversation just in time to make things worse.

Everyone, even Dr Bairstow, turned to stare at him.

‘What?’ Peterson demanded, defensively. ‘Helen was researching anaphylaxis and his name came up.’

I’m not sure if he was attempting to deflect Dr Bairstow’s wrath or not. Whichever it was, it didn’t work. Charles Richet was dismissed as irrelevant in the scheme of things. Just as Dr Bairstow leaned over his desk for the kill, however, Markham pulled out his recorder, gently placed it on the desk and stepped back.

It’s not often you see Dr Bairstow struggle. I could sympathise. Anyone who deals with Markham would be familiar with this situation. Wearing his Director hat, the Boss would want to know what Markham thought he was doing with a recorder. Wearing his historian hat, he would want to know if there was anything interesting on it.

He pulled himself together.

‘What is that?’

‘It’s a recorder, sir. You know, the History Department use them.’

Once again, the beaky nose turned his way and we waited for him to be blasted from the face of the earth. Apparently unaware he had only seconds left in this world, Markham innocently picked up the recorder and began to fiddle with it, talking all the while.

‘I don’t know what I’ve got, of course. It was dark under the stage, and even when I’d got him out and around the back, he was still a bit bleary and in no state to continue, so I took advantage of the opportunity to fulfil a lifelong ambition and ensure that the show did go on.’

He was still casually fiddling with the recorder. He could drop it at any moment. I was nearly having a heart attack and I’m pretty sure even Dr Bairstow was holding his breath. ‘I’ve always wanted to go

on the stage sir, and after my performance today, I reckon my agent is going to need some publicity shots, so I thought I'd take a quick selfie.'

I waited for Dr Bairstow to demand to know who had bastardised the English language to the extent that 'selfie' was even a word.

He did not. He took a deep breath and held out his hand for the recorder.

Markham smiled sunnily at him and handed it over.

He hadn't been able to record but there was a series of still images, most of which were either too dark or were obviously of his elbow. At least, I hoped it was his elbow. Some of Markham's outlying areas can be a little unruly and sometimes you don't know quite which bit of him you're dealing with.

But there, towards the end, were three images.

The first showed a man sitting down, head resting back against a wall, eyes closed. He might have been unconscious or just resting his eyes. The light hadn't been good, but we could make out a long chin, receding hair, the distinctively high forehead, and a thin nose.

'That's just after I got him off the stage,' said Markham. 'He was in shock, I think. I just sat him down and waited for someone to come and check him over. Someone called to us and Shakespeare said he was OK. Although not in quite those words. Anyway, he obviously wanted to watch the play and see how it was going, so I helped him up. I was OK, but he was a bit taller than me and I think he forgot to crouch. He banged his head on something, staggered a bit, fell down a step and banged his head again.

'I shouted as loudly as I dared, but no one came. He wasn't out cold, but he certainly wasn't functioning properly, so I took a chance.' He flicked to the next image. A long pale face stared in bemusement, while Markham, arm around his shoulders, beamed up at the camera. Given the circumstances, a remarkably clear image.

It was the third image, however, that was the money shot.

A full face, looking directly at us, slightly smiling. And it was him. Definitely, recognisably, undeniably Shakespeare.

Markham said nothing because there wasn't anything anyone could say. Not even Dr Bairstow.

To sum up, not only had we great footage of 17th-century London Bridge, of Southwark, the Tabard, the docks, a Tudor ship, the market, the Globe and its audience, their production of *Hamlet*, the man himself playing one of his own parts, we had *the* definitive identifying image of William Shakespeare. Bloody hell, we're good. We're St Mary's and we really are the dog's bollocks.

I was willing to bet Dr Bairstow was in agreement, although he would almost certainly drop down dead rather than admit it. He and

Markham were old adversaries, however, and there was an established procedure to work through. They stared at each other across his desk and prepared to enjoy themselves.

‘If I thought for one moment, Mr Markham, that it would get you out of my unit, I would sign you up for Equity myself.’

‘That’s extremely generous of you, sir, but I couldn’t possibly leave St Mary’s to lurch along without me.’

‘And yet I believe we would survive.’

And now he was an *injured* abandoned puppy in a snowstorm. ‘Without me, sir?’

‘Even without you, Mr Markham. I am certain I could not live with myself should St Mary’s turn out to be an insurmountable obstacle to your glittering career on stage and screen.’

‘Well, thank you, sir. I have to say I couldn’t have done any of it without you, as indeed I shall say in my Oscar acceptance speech.’

‘I applaud your loyalty.’

‘I’m not one to forget my humble beginnings, sir.’

‘I am gratified to hear it and greatly look forward to viewing the imprint of your body in the famous Hollywood Walk of Fame.’

‘I think you’ll find, sir, it’s only hand and footprints. Not a whole body cast.’

‘That is unfortunate. Frequent practice does, however, enable me to live with such disappointments. Please do not allow me to detain you, Mr Markham. I wouldn’t want to get between you and the silver screen.’

‘That’s very kind of you, sir.’

‘Not at all. Before you leave us for fame and fortune, however, I believe Major Guthrie wants a quick word about your communication protocols.’

‘My what sir?’

I believe he wishes to focus on your explanation of that well-known Shakespearian phrase “Okey dokey”.’

‘Ah. I can explain...’

The door opened and Major Guthrie appeared. The small pack of frozen peas he was clutching to a very large black eye was in no way obscuring the awfulness of his frown.

‘Do come in,’ said Dr Bairstow affably. ‘Mr Markham is ready for his close-up now, Mr DeMille.’

THE END

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